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SUBJECT: ROK'S 17TH NATIONAL ASSEMBLY WINDS DOWN: A ROUNDUP

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: The 17th National Assembly, which officially ended, was characterized by the prominent role of 386er representatives (those born in the 60s that led the democratization movement in the 80s), its left-leaning ideology, the increased number of women, and intense partisan politics. More than 7,000 bills were introduced during the 17th National Assembly, three times the number of bills introduced during the 16th National Assembly, but the low passage rate of legislator-introduced bills of 21.2 percent (26.8 percent in 16th) raised concerns about the efficiency and quality of legislative activities. END SUMMARY

PARTY COMPOSITION

¶2. (SBU) The 17th National Assembly was elected in 2004 with the Uri Party -- the progressive ruling party at the time -- gaining 152 seats out of the total 299, as a result of public anger at the opposition parties for their efforts to attempt to impeach President Roh. The Grand National Party, the Democratic Labor Party, the Democratic Party, the Liberty Democratic Alliance Party, the United Citizen 21 Party, and independents gained 121, 10, 9, 4, 1, and 2 seats, respectively. The 17th NA was the first assembly to grant the liberal democrats a majority since the current constitutions was adopted 1987. The progressive Democratic Labor Party won its first seats in Parliament.

FEATURES OF 17th NA REPRESENTATIVES

¶3. (SBU) The 17th National Assembly was the main stage for the emergence of young representatives from the "386 generation" who were characterized by their left-leaning ideologies and participation in the democratization movement in the late 1980s. 62.5 percent of legislators were first-term members who proved their passions by introducing a total of 4,199 bills, more than triple the 1,343 bills proposed by experienced legislators. However, the passage rates were almost equal with eleven to twelve percent, and the "newer" assembly was ultimately unable to fulfill hopes the new blood would clean up politics. Also, more representatives were from professional backgrounds and participated in research activities, signaling hopes for an increasingly intelligent legislature. However, televised footage of physical violence among legislators, reports of corruption and sex scandals contributed to the public's

disillusionment of politics.

LEGISLATIVE ACTIVITIES

14. (SBU) The Uri Party-led initiative to pass the four major reform bills, i.e., abolishment of the National Security Law, Media Relation Reform Law, Private School Revision Law, and Truth and Reconciliation Law, failed to pass the National Assembly because of GNP opposition. Nevertheless, the 17th NA introduced an abundance of new bills (7,489), triple the number of bills proposed in the 16th National Assembly. However, Professor Park Hyo Jong of Seoul National University criticized that the bills introduced by the representatives lagged behind in professionalism compared to government-proposed laws, and that representatives worked hard to introduce bills to raise their number of proposals but failed to actually pass them, leading to debate on the efficiency and quality of legislative activities. In fact, only 1,351 bills (21 percent) out of the total 6,387 bills introduced by representatives passed the National Assembly, compared to the 563 governmental bills (51 percent) out of the 1,102 bills that were proposed by the government.

INTENSE PARTISANSHIP

15. (SBU) Beginning with the introduction of the four major reform bills, heated partisanship undermined the workings of the 17th NA. Partisan divisions were intensified with representatives' tendencies to conform to party positions and ideological debates, and often led to protracted debates on policy issues. The final sessions were tainted by inconclusive partisan fighting over the citizen pension law, private school law, law school law, the reopening of the Korean market to US beef, and the KORUS FTA. In addition, the breakdown and mergers between the Uri-Party, the Democratic Party, and the United Democratic Party brought criticisms that compared legislators to migratory birds. The public perceived the parliament to be more occupied with political infighting than the public interest.

CALL FOR CHANGE

16. (SBU) As the 17th NA concluded in public disappointment, specialists advised ways to improve the workings of the next assembly. Candidate for the 18th NA Speaker Ahn Sang Soo (GNP) suggested the establishment of an institution to provide incentives for policy research, support the passage of bills, monitor national administration, and check budget developments. Soong Sil University Professor Kang Kyung Geun promoted greater power and authority for committees would help resolve the lack of professionalism and low efficiency shown by the low bill passage rate. Kyung Hee University Professor Kim Min Jeon advised assemblymen to restrain from blind party loyalty, and urged the ruling party to check rather than yield to the Blue House. Seoul National University Professor Park Hyo Jong stressed that the National Assembly must shift from sensational corruption disclosures and political disputes to policy issues. Outgoing Speaker of the House Im Chae Jung said that the public will demand satisfactory progress on important issues such as U.S. beef imports, the KORUS FTA, the socioeconomic gap, and rising inflation, which the 17th NA failed to address adequately let alone resolve.

COMMENT

17. (SBU) Corresponding to the overall democratic developments, South Koreans are now demanding more from their legislators: more transparency, more professionalism, and above all, more effectiveness in addressing their real

economic and social concerns. To be fair, over the past two decades, the South Korean legislative has emerged as a powerful institution capable of its proper check and balance role. However, it is also true that the National Assembly is still characterized by severe ideological polarization and crippling factionalism, as shown by the poor performance of the 17th National Assembly in passing key bills. Changing old habits takes time, but Korean legislators are changing, even if much too slowly for most Koreans.

VERSHBOW